

‘AUDIENCES ARE COMPOSED OF
SENTIMENTAL NECROPHILES’:

Notes on Norman Mailer’s The Deer Park: A Play

K E V I N P O W E R

Yes, the play should be, in the best sense, tender—these characters, vain, silly, half-mad with delusion, or mad with Faustian vision, marooned forever from a clear sense of the real, exist nonetheless with pain in their hearts [. . .].

“A Note on the Production,” *The Deer Park: A Play*

RENAISSANCE MAN AT THE THEATRE

In the Introduction to *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer*, published as a paperback original by Dell in 1967, Norman Mailer offers a brief description of his artistic methods. Rejecting the canonical figuration of the writer’s role as that of as “craftsman” or “jeweller,” Mailer characterizes himself instead as “a big, brawny nineteenth-century version of Renaissance Man—a prospector, son” (11). Like a prospector, Mailer-as-writer is:

seduced more by method than by gold or gem [. . .] he’s impatient, ambitious, and obsessed with one idea—move on fast. Keep looking for the biggest mine of them all. He doesn’t want to get caught in the refining and polishing. So he sticks in a shovel here, sets off dynamite there [. . .] Look to learn a little about everything. That is the instinct of the Renaissance[.] (11)

Thus, writing in 1967, Mailer offers a compound metaphor in mitigation of his aesthetic restlessness; he will not be a jeweller, who “stays in his shop

[. . .] and generally disports like a medieval alchemist”; instead, when we read Mailer’s work, “We might just as well be in at the birth of science—Renaissance Man is looking for his experimental method, which he encounters, let us suspect, by dramatic contrast” (*Short Fiction* 10–11). The imagery here, as Mailer moves from pre-scientific medieval lore through “the birth of science” and on to the capitalist individualism embodied by the figure of the prospector, characteristically defaults to the dialectic (“dramatic contrast”), a key principle of Mailer’s aesthetics at least since the publication of his overtly Marxist second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1952). The dialogues that appeared in *The Presidential Papers* (1963) and in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966) demonstrated that Mailer’s dialectical preoccupations could be forcefully expressed in the form of a dramatic exchange. It was more or less inevitable, then, that Mailer would eventually turn to the narrative form that most overtly embodies dialectical tensions: the stage play. And so it was that, in 1957, Mailer began the decade-long process of adapting his third novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), for the stage (Lennon 216). Long overshadowed, in critical evaluations of Mailer’s work, by the major prose works of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Deer Park: A Play* (1967) nonetheless retains considerable interest as Mailer’s only full-length excursion onto “the live and all but bleeding boards” of the theatre (*Play* 13).

The first draft of *The Deer Park: A Play* consisted of four acts and had an estimated three-hour running time (Lennon 224). An excerpt from the first draft of the play appears in *Advertisements for Myself*, prefaced by the note that several changes to narrative and setting have been made in the process of adapting the novel for the stage: “In adapting the book, I changed a few things: most noticeably, Eitel and Marion Faye have been in prison before the play begins and Marion Faye has had a career as an actor. Let it also be said that the action takes place in Hell” (386).

Over the next ten years, from 1957 to 1967, Mailer revised the script a total of four times (*Play* 10). It was staged first in Provincetown in the summer of 1966 by the amateur theatrical group, Act IV, that Mailer had established in cooperation with his third wife, Beverly Bentley (Manso 429–433); then by the Actor’s Studio in New York (Manso 440); and finally in a professional Off-Broadway production at the Theatre de Lys (Manso 437), where, having opened on January 31st, 1967 (Lennon 372), it ran for over a hundred performances (Rollyson 198). The cast of the Off-Broadway production included Beverly Bentley as Lulu Meyers, Mailer’s friend Mickey Knox as

Collie Munshin, and Rip Torn, who would also appear in Mailer's third film *Maidstone* (1972), as Marion Faye (*Play* 192). A hardcover edition of the playscript, featuring a lengthy introductory essay by Mailer and a "Note on the Production" as well as "Comments on the Characters," was brought out by Dial Press in 1967; simultaneously, a mass market paperback was published by Dell. It is again characteristic of Mailer that his first published playscript should be buttressed by so much expository matter, some of it inarguably didactic in tone; the "Introduction" is a careful attempt to situate *The Deer Park: A Play* in the context of the American theatre of its time, and serves, as much of Mailer's nonfiction prose did during the 1960s, as another apologia for Mailer's aesthetic methods—another advertisement for himself. It seems clear that, long after the Theatre de Lys production had closed, Mailer continued to think of the play as a significant constituent part of his *oeuvre* and as a valuable work in its own right; as late as April 2007, Mailer was working on a new revision of the text (Lennon 755), and had discussed with his son Michael the idea of producing a filmed reading, which Michael thought might be of interest to cable television, although the project came to nothing (Lennon 752).

The critical consensus, in contemporary reviews of the first New York production, was that *The Deer Park: A Play* was a minor work (Manso 437–9). Carl Rollyson characterises the reviews as "mixed to negative" (198). Wilfred Sheed in *Life* wrote that "[d]ramatically speaking, Mailer gets himself off the ground splendidly, but his vehicle doesn't move an inch" (Manso 437). Walter Kerr in the *New York Times* wrote that "Mailer can keep a scene moving" but complained that the play was "pretentious" (Manso 438). Edith Oliver in *The New Yorker* opined that "Mailer may have adapted his novel but he has not dramatised it, and he has drowned it in words, even filling the chinks between scenes with narration, so that very little registers" (Manso 438–9). Mailer himself, in his Introduction to the published text, described the play as "perhaps the dearest work of all my work. There were times when I thought I even cared more for it than the novel from which it was delivered; it was certainly different from the novel, narrower, more harrowing, funnier I hoped, sadder, certainly more tragic" (*Play* 11). The Introduction situates Mailer himself as a comic figure: "A playwright in love with his play. It calls for Voltaire, Shaw, or our own Albee to delineate it" (*Play* 12). But this invocation of the comic only half-conceals Mailer's genuine ambitions for his play; he notes that he has experienced "too many

hours of rage when he declaimed to himself that his play was as good as *Death of a Salesman*, or even, and here he gulped hard, *A Streetcar Named Desire*" (Play 12). In a characteristic move, Mailer mocks his own ambition while also inviting us to consider *The Deer Park: A Play* in the company of these acknowledged masterpieces of American drama. Overall, the initial critical consensus decreed that the play was ambitious but flawed, and suggested that Mailer had not fully understood the specific aesthetic requirements of the dramatic form.

Perhaps as a consequence of these early "mixed to negative" reviews, *The Deer Park: A Play* has been under-represented in formal Mailer criticism. Richard Poirier, in *Mailer* (1972), ignores the play in favour of the novels and non-fiction, while Richard Foster, in his short 1968 monograph on Mailer, pauses only to note that the play's presentation of Sergius O'Shaughnessy is more effective than in the novel (29). Max F. Schulz, in his essay "Mailer's Divine Comedy," offers a reading of the novel using cues given by the play; Schultz emphasizes *The Deer Park* as the Inferno section of what he describes as Mailer's Dantean triptych of novels (*Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, and *An American Dream*, representing Purgatory, Hell, and Heaven respectively). Gerald Weales, in a review of the play entitled "The Park in the Playhouse," first published in *Reporter* in 1967, writes that "both the novel and the play, which follows the novel very closely, use the professional fraudulence of Hollywood and the commercial artificiality of Desert D'Or, the resort setting for the action, as masks for the pretenses, conscious and unconscious, that men use in their sexual, political, and artistic lives" (Adams 163). Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), compares *The Deer Park: A Play* unfavourably to the novel on which it is based, and is particularly disappointed in the changes introduced to conclude the play: "the drastically different denouement imposed upon the stage version, with Eitel's sad, self-regarding death, devalues the work even more outrageously" than Marion Faye's transformation into "a sexual Faust of Hip" (318).

Perhaps understandably, Maggie McKinley's short introductory volume on Mailer's work (*Understanding Norman Mailer* [2017]) mentions the play only in an aside (57), preferring to concentrate on the major prose works. J. Michael Lennon, in *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (2013), notes that the play was a commercial failure, playing often to a "half full" auditorium and losing Mailer \$60,000 of his own money (373–4). Lennon also suggests that the play is finally a minor work, undermined by a sense of historical and

aesthetic belatedness: “the play is set during the Korean War and the characters, now residing in some antechamber of hell, are remembering everything. The action is over; the inmates are serving their sentences” (373). We might note, however, that even Mailer’s minor works offer rich perspectives on his themes and strategies—*The Deer Park: A Play* no less than Mailer’s poetry, films, and short fiction, all of which have received critical attention in recent years. In particular, *The Deer Park: A Play* is so closely derived from its source novel that it is very much worth considering the two texts together, before moving on to look at the play itself in, as it were, *propria persona*.

THE DEER PARK: NOVEL AND PLAY

The Deer Park is, of course, Mailer’s Hollywood novel, originally inspired by his first visit to the town in 1950 (Lennon 120). Narrated by an ex-Air Force pilot (and veteran of the Korean War) named Sergius O’Shaughnessy, *The Deer Park* focuses chiefly on the doomed love affair of Charles Eitel, a disgraced movie director, and Elena Esposito, a former dancer. Most of the novel’s action takes place in Desert D’Or, a town in the Californian desert based loosely on Palm Springs (*Advertisements* 175), which Mailer visited in 1952 (Rollyson 87). Desert D’Or is “a distance of some two hundred miles from the capital of cinema, as I choose to call it” (9). The “capital of cinema” is, of course, Hollywood. Yet the phrase conceals a Marxist pun. Capital, we might recall, is not simply money—it is “money which is used to buy something only in order to sell it again [. . .] This means that capital exists only *within* the process of buying and selling, as money advanced only in order to get it back again” (Marxists.org). Thus, in the opening paragraph of *The Deer Park*, Mailer calls our attention to one of the underlying metaphorical structures of the novel. And while the opening chapter goes on to describe the stores in Desert D’Or in which “salesmen opened panels in the wall to exhibit summer suits,” and the jeweller whose window displays “a thirty-thousand dollar necklace” (9–10), *The Deer Park* is not merely about the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. Rather, the novel’s Marxist understanding of “capital” is applied, with remarkable consistency, to the sexual behaviour of its characters. *The Deer Park* is a novel in which “the process of buying and selling” metaphorizes a range of human behaviours, with a particular emphasis on sexuality: a representational strategy that ul-

timately constitutes a savage diagnosis of contemporary American social and sexual ills.

The title and epigraph of the novel are taken from Barthélémy Mouffle D'Angerville's *Vie Privée de Louis XV* (1781), a semi-obscure work of both history and gossip, which describes, *inter alia*, the *Parc au cerfs* at Versailles, established in the 1750s, which served as a "private bordello for the use of the King" (Gooch 157). D'Angerville describes the Deer Park at Versailles as:

that gorge of innocence and virtue in which were engulfed so many victims who when they returned to society brought with them depravity, debauchery and all the vices they naturally acquired from the infamous officials of such a place. (*Deer Park* 6)

Nathan A. Scott notes that "this infernal playground of Louis XV may be taken as a metaphor of the Deer Park, or jungle, which America itself has become" (39). Scott's description suggests that the America of *The Deer Park* has become a kind of Hell (an "infernal playground"), or a locus of primitive energies (a "jungle"). But he ignores the metaphorical association evoked most forcibly by Mailer's epigraph. Louis XV's Deer Park was a private brothel; Mailer is suggesting that America, too, has become a place in which sex is bought and sold. If on the one hand the underlying metaphorical structure of *The Deer Park* derives from the Marxist theory of capital, on the other it derives from the concept of prostitution. Accordingly, *The Deer Park* is a novel filled with literal and metaphorical pimps and madams, prostitutes and johns. In *The Deer Park*, the economic basis of society is inseparable from prostitution and its attendant activities. The economy of *The Deer Park* is a sexual economy. Sexuality is figured here as a commodity possessing an exchange value. Almost every character in the novel has some experience of prostitution. Dorothea is a former call girl (14), Marion Faye is a literal pimp (23), Herman Teppis is a metaphorical pimp, Elena Esposito tells Charles Eitel that a man once paid her for sex (65), Bobby is a literal prostitute, Lulu Meyers, the starlet, is Bobby's metaphorical counterpart; Collie Munshin, the commercial film producer, is a metaphorical pimp; and so on. In fact, only Sergius O'Shaughnessy fails to engage in any kind of paid sexual transaction as such. When the novel begins, Sergius is sexually impotent: "It had come on me shortly before I left Japan, and I had been helpless ever since" (24). Crucially, this limitation removes Sergius, at least

initially, from the sexual economy that operates in Desert D'Or. He is, at first, a figure without (sexual) exchange value, and therefore exists outside or beyond the systems of commodification that enmesh the novel's other characters. His relationship with Lulu Meyers—a movie star and Charles Eitel's ex-wife—signals the return of his sexual potency and his entry into the sexual economy of Desert D'Or. He, too, becomes embroiled in what Max F. Schultz calls “the circularity of the cash-sex nexus” (56), and the secondary narrative of *The Deer Park* traces Sergius's progress through this foreclosed and foreclosing system of referents and towards a more open-ended language of metaphor predicated on growth and forward movement. In the closing lines of the novel, Sergius receives from God a new metaphor for sex—“think of Sex as Time, and Time as the connection of new circuits,” a metaphor which he says “gives hope”—hope, that is, that he may now be able to conceive of a sexuality liberated from the constraints of capital; from the “prisons of pain, the wading pools of pleasure, and the public and professional voices of our sentimental land” (363). In one sense, then, *The Deer Park* dramatizes the search for a new metaphor for sex and sexuality, one not circumscribed by the apparently all-encompassing representational claims of capital and prostitution. In another, and related, sense, *The Deer Park* articulates, for the first time in Mailer's fiction, a conception of dialectical growth at odds with the dominant economic, social, cultural, and political priorities of the contemporary United States.

This opposition between a foreclosed and commodifying exchange economy and a dialectical conception of growth is replicated, with interesting alterations, in *The Deer Park: A Play*. Like the novel upon which it is based, *The Deer Park: A Play* dramatizes a fully operative sexual economy, in which sexual acts are defined by their exchange-value. In its opening scene, one of Marion Faye's prostitutes, Bobby, has returned from an assignation with Charles Eitel, who has given her five hundred dollars when “he was supposed to leave just fifty” (49). Bobby believes Eitel has given her the extra money because “I think Charley has a crush on me” (48). Marion demonstrates that Bobby's conception of her sexual encounter with Eitel has no other meaning than the economic: he calls Eitel and asks him, “When would you like to see Bobby? Tomorrow night? Night after?” Eitel replies, “Oh. God, never” (52). Again and again in the play, sexual acts are figured in terms of their exchange value: Sergius describes Eitel as “the cause of more than one million-dollar divorce” (53); Eitel describes Elena as a “whore” (77); Herman Teppis

describes Lulu Meyers as “a delicate perishable fruit” that must be taken “a long distance to market” (91); Elena remembers an incident in which she had sex for money: “I enjoyed spending the twenty dollars” (107). Faye reminds Eitel of how deeply enmeshed he is in the sexual economy: “Do yourself a favour. Ask Elena if she ever did it for money” (106). Elena tells Eitel: “there was a man, and he wanted to, and I refused, and then the man offered money, twenty dollars he offered” (107). In response, Eitel prepares to sell his script—about a television host who becomes a saint, as in the novel—to Collie Munshin: Eitel’s sense of betrayal by Elena issues in his own act of (creative) prostitution (116–8). The sexual economy of the play is totalizing: even Eitel’s script is described, by Collie Munshin, as “a whorehouse” (114). In this, the metaphorical structures of the play closely track those of the source novel. In fact, this metaphorical structure is even extended to the extra-diegetic materials that accompany the published playscript, most notably in the lengthy Introduction that Mailer appended to the text—an essay worthy of analysis in its own right.

“SHIT, SENORITA! SAYS BROADWAY”

In his Introduction to *The Deer Park: A Play*, Mailer offers a diagnosis of the New York theatre scene in which the ills of Broadway synecdochise the ills of American culture more generally. During a two-week period in early 1967, while *The Deer Park: A Play* was running at the Theatre de Lys, Mailer went to see over a dozen Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, including *Barefoot in the Park*, *Man of La Mancha*, *The Odd Couple*, and Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming* (Play 17). Juxtaposing the rapturous critical reception generally afforded these plays with his own skeptical experiences of attending them, Mailer offers a brief scatological riff on the contrast he perceives between critical reputation and aesthetic actuality: “Quick! Give us the name of this musical so that we may see it. But the name, friends, is always ‘*Our Newest Turd Has Just Moved In*.’ ‘Shit, Senorita!’ says Broadway” (Play 16). For Mailer, the popular Broadway plays of 1967 are marked by “pits of monotony” and are often “next door to a swindle” (Play 16). Throughout his Introduction, Mailer posits the institution of the Broadway play as one more manifestation of what he called, in his 1960 essay on John F. Kennedy, “the Supermarket”—“that homogenous extension of stainless surfaces and psychoanalysed people” (*Papers* 44) that is midcentury America. In other

words, Broadway is yet another aspect of the increasing homogenization of American culture and society. The cause of this increasing homogenization Mailer identifies here as the essentially capitalist problem of inflation. Richard Godden, in his chapter on *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in *Fictions of Capital*, explains that “[t]he prime economic grievance of the late sixties was inflation” (185). Money was losing its value. The metaphor with which Mailer explains this crux is striking:

Some years ago, Willem de Kooning gave a drawing to Robert Rauschenberg, who then promptly erased the drawing and signed his own name to the smudged page. Next, the erased drawing was sold . . . An erased drawing is restored in value by a signature. Emptiness plus authority equals money. (*Play* 17–18)

Meaning, and therefore value, resides entirely in the cachet associated with a famous (and therefore bankable) name. Mailer’s survey of Broadway plays in the 1966–67 season insists that, on the Broadway stage, inflation has trumped intrinsic (artistic) value. Economic inflation, along with its attendant social and political anxieties, becomes his metaphor for the burgeoning homogeneity and commercialised cowardice of the contemporary theatre:

It seems we are now ready to talk of certain plays, the ones which might put the signature on the erased drawing. They are authority stamped upon emptiness, they are money. The authority of such plays is that they are known as a hit. That is their value. That is how they give value to an audience. (*Play* 18)

The popular theatre, Mailer contends, is now pre-eminently a matter of economics, so much so that “certain plays” themselves derive their value from a system of exchange in the same way that money does: these plays “are money.” As Marx writes in *Capital*: “Money is a crystal formed of necessity in the course of exchanges, whereby different products of labour are practically equated to one another and thus by practice converted into commodities” (53). Like the exchange economy of Desert D’Or in the novel of *The Deer Park*, Broadway is a foreclosed and foreclosing system in which value resides only within a process of buying and selling.

Opposed to this closed system of commodification, Mailer posits a conception of theatre as ritual:

the theatre lives on what it can do uniquely, on moods of depth and perfume and terror and exaltation and cascades of laughter which no other form can provide—it is a ceremony which takes place in a cave . . . it is like religion for the irreligious and gives promise of something which may live forever. (32)

“Ceremony,” for Mailer, summons the primitive—“a cave.” Theatre as ritual, then, offers the possibility of transcending the commodifying system in which plays are ascribed merely an exchange value. Mailer posits his own play as such a ritual: *The Deer Park: A Play* is, for him, a play that “attempt[s] to find a piece of that most mysterious and magical communion some call ceremony, some church, and some theatre” (*Play* 32). As in the closing lines of *The Deer Park* (novel), Mailer reaches here for a new language, based in religion, with which to metaphorize artistic and collective experience. Just as God offers Sergius O’Shaughnessy a new metaphor for sex, so Mailer offers a new metaphor for the theatre: the play as ceremony, promising nothing less than immortality (“something which may live forever”). In seeking after a specifically non-economic basis for the art of the theatre, Mailer grounds his own sense of the theatre’s importance in the original function of the play as primitive ritual:

Good plays . . . are plays which attempt to reach a moment sufficiently magical to live in the deepest nerves and most buried caves of the memory of the people who have seen them, these plays speak of the fire at the edge of the wood and hair rising on the back of the neck when the wind becomes too intimate in its sound. (32)

Mailer’s analysis of Broadway is nothing if not dialectical. His criticisms embrace not just writers, actors, and producers, but also the Broadway audience. In fact, for Mailer, the Broadway audience is “the heart of the theatre—this liberal complacent materialistic greedy pill-ridden anxiety-laden bored miserable and powerless jumble of suburban couples who jam

every Broadway smash for the first few months” (*Play* 18). Of these couples, Mailer writes:

[T]hey are tired because their nerves are stale, flat, bored, and unendurable from the stale, flat, unprofitable work they have done as a horde of the middle and professional class all day in offices which buy and sell commodities less interesting and less well-made than they used to be, and they have stifled in modern kitchens . . . and gotten caught in suburban traffic. (*Play* 18)

These “suburban couples,” according to Mailer, exist in a symbiotic relationship with the producers of Broadway plays—it is their consent which is necessary to stamp “authority on emptiness.” Thus Mailer implicates his own audience in a kind of institutionalised swindle, a scam whereby value is (re)produced by consensual illusion, and the ritualistic-primitive aspect of theatre has been superseded by the totalising machinations of consumer capitalism. This notion of the implicated audience is developed in the text of *The Deer Park: A Play*, most notably in the play’s extension of “Hell” to include the audience watching a given performance of the play (*Play* 45). The “Hell” of *The Deer Park: A Play* is a locale profoundly implicated in the sexual economy the narrative describes: if the audience, too, is in Hell, then they, too, are implicated in a world of commodification, in which sexual acts are subject to exchange value. Commenting on his decision to set the play of *The Deer Park* in hell in “Hip, Hell, and the Navigator,” an interview included in *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer said:

[W]hen I was doing *The Deer Park* as a novel, characters existed on one level. It seemed to me that putting them into Hell deepened the meaning of their moral experience. That the situation of being in Hell and not knowing it is perhaps the first inversion—no, I don’t want to say it that way—is the first dislocation of the moral space. . . . I wanted precisely this double state of existence, this existence of a people who are in Hell and did not know it. (*Advertisements* 335)

Hence *The Deer Park: A Play* dramatizes not merely a “dislocation of the moral space” but a “double state of existence,” in which actions have

consequences over and above their immediate narrative consequences, and extending even to the audience of a given performance of the play. Setting the action of the play in Hell, and including the audience within this schema, confronts us with a discomfiting challenge: we must ask ourselves to what extent we are complicit in the foreclosed and foreclosing metaphorical economies of the onstage action—that is, to what extent we are in Hell, and do not know it. Dialogue spoken in the play often seems deliberately crafted to evoke such a reflection in the audience, as when Charles Eitel tells Sergius, “Audiences are composed of sentimental necrophiles. They dine on organs, nectar, and blood. And drink pious sentiments” (*Play* 54). As Eitel speaks this line, the stage directions indicate that we should also see “Lulu holding an Academy award, giving tears and kisses to the audience” (*Play* 54). Granting Eitel’s bitterness in this scene, we must accept that notice is served: we are the sentimental necrophiles—unless, of course, we choose not to be. Mailer’s characters, in *The Deer Park: A Play*, cannot so choose; as J. Michael Lennon points out, “the action is over; the inmates are serving their sentences” (Lennon 373). But what is this “action”? What is the substance of *The Deer Park: A Play*?

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MOVIES, MONEY, AND LOVE

Structurally, *The Deer Park: A Play* consists of a Prologue and two Acts, each consisting of forty-four scenes or “Changes,” which Mailer says are intended to “suggest the rapid cuts of a film” (36). In “A Note on the Production,” which prefaces the published play, Mailer suggests “that there be an electric board mounted overhead” which will display the numbers of the “Changes” in reverse order as each Act of the play unfolds: “from Change Forty-Four to Change Forty-Three all the way down to Change One” (36). Mailer explains that “the use of numbers is essential to the fun of the evening and the depth of the statement, for we are in effect enjoying a countdown” (36), and, in fact, the electric board was used in the first production (Weales 165). Later, in the stage directions that end the Prologue, Mailer explicitly associates the numbers on the electric board with the “Supermarket” of technological consumerism: “Numbers—we whisper it—are the blood of technology—so the tote board is a reminder of the world’s blood, for the world is technology now” (58). Thus Mailer seeks to dominate the stage with an objective correlative for his play’s critique of the “Supermarket,” with its clientele of

sentimental necrophiles. We might read the electric board, in another sense, as symbolic of the overdetermined quality of much of *The Deer Park: A Play*. From its lengthy introduction to the wheedling presence of Sergius as narrator to the metatheatrical imbrication of the audience into the play's aesthetic space, the play seeks to corral our responses in a way that might remind us of Edith Oliver's complaint that the story is not "dramatized" but "drowned in words" (Manso 438–9. Even more so than the (fitfully didactic) novel from which it derives, *The Deer Park: A Play* seeks to attain to the condition of preachment or parable; the decision to set the play in Hell is merely one aspect of Mailer's perhaps overly allegorical project here.

Of the thirteen characters who appear in *The Deer Park: A Play*, only Sergius is aware that he is in Hell. Introducing himself, Sergius says:

My part in what you are about to see is unimportant, yet by another measure I suppose I am very important, even essential. For everything you see here tonight takes place in my mind. (43)

To set *The Deer Park: A Play* in Hell is to remove its ostensibly realistic setting to an "inverted" or "dislocated" "moral space." Hell, in *The Deer Park: A Play*, is, however, pre-eminently a matter of interiority: Sergius explains to the audience that "everything you see here tonight takes place in my mind" (43), and at the play's climax Marion Faye slaps his own forehead and says, "the centre of Hell must be in here" (177). A tension is established between the Introduction's explicit suggestion that the play be read as a moralizing critique of American culture, and the text's insistence on Hell as a matter of interiorized individual experience. That this tension is not fruitfully resolved, or even confronted as such, in either action or dialogue must count as one of the play's signal aesthetic failures; it is, finally, difficult to see how setting the action of the play in Hell contributes to its overall dramatic effect, as opposed to its pertinence as critique.

In the novel, Sergius functioned as what Lawrence Buell has called an "observer-hero." The observer-hero narrative, as described by Buell, is "a story told by a dramatized first-person narrator about a significant relationship or encounter he has had with another person" (Buell 93). Examples listed by Buell include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), to which *The Deer Park* is indebted (*Spooky* 76). In the play, however, Sergius's role as narrator undergoes a shift. No longer the mediating consciousness

through which we perceive the stories of Charles Eitel, Elena Esposito, Marion Faye, and others, he becomes instead an overdetermining chorus-figure who interposes his commentary between scenes of directly staged action. "Accept me as your guide," he says in the Prologue, "on a tour through strong sunlight, deep nights, hey hey! and conversations about movies, money, and love" (*Play* 45). In practice, however, Sergius recedes from prominence during much of the play's action. He serves as a conversational foil to Eitel and Faye, and, at the end, delivers a speech, adapted verbatim from the novel, advancing a new metaphor for Sex and Time (*Play* 190). However, Sergius's conception of Sex and Time as "the connection of new circuits" here rings with a harsh irony, as the play to which they serve as coda has dramatized not the connection of new circuits—that is, a dialectical process of growth—but rather the belated sterility of Desert-D'Or-as-Hell. The most crucial aspect of stage-Sergius, however, may be the fact that the action of the play takes place in his mind, in Hell, and that the characters to whom he introduces us are dead (though they "believe they are alive" [*Play* 44]). Sergius's consciousness, in the play, therefore becomes the mediating instrument for Mailer's critique of theatre audiences: if audiences are, as Eitel says, composed of sentimental necrophiles, then the audience of *The Deer Park: A Play* must confront the fact that it is watching a drama enacted by the dead—an overt literalisation of Eitel's cynical remark that sharpens the play's critique of American consumer capitalism and of the art that it produces.

For much of its length, the narrative of *The Deer Park: A Play* follows its source novel closely. Key differences include an orgy scene, expressionistically staged, during which the participating characters address the audience directly. Here another reason for Mailer's decision to invoke the license of allegory becomes clear, as the fact that the play takes place in the consciousness of the damned Sergius permits Mailer to interweave his more realistic scenes with scenes deploying expressionist techniques. The most significant divagation from the novel occurs in the ending of the play. *The Deer Park: A Play* also retells the love affair of Charles Eitel and Elena Esposito, which in the novel issues in defeat, as Eitel capitulates to the Senate Subversive Committee, escapes the Hollywood blacklist, and begins to make exploitative but commercially successful movies again; at the same time, Eitel marries Elena but carries on an affair with the starlet Lulu Meyers (*Deer Park* 356). In the play, however, Eitel dies of a heart attack, and Elena begins an affair with Marion Faye (*Play* 189). Kate Millett correctly observes that the play

version of *The Deer Park* rewrites Charles Eitel as a “hero,” forcing on the narrative a tragic ending that somewhat vitiates the critique of sentimental art implicit in the rest of the narrative. If the ending of the novel seeks to generate a rueful sense of compromise by recounting the banal fates of Eitel and Elena, then the play reaches instead for a sense of tragedy, as Eitel delivers his dying speech in accents of mourning and rage: “the clot of unborn rage at all I have not done and all that I will never do . . . It tears now at my heart” (*Play* 188). It is difficult not to read this moment against Eitel’s earlier contention that “audiences are composed of sentimental necrophiles,” and to note that Mailer has granted Eitel himself a sentimental death scene in the great Broadway tradition. Sergius’s closing speech aside, the play ends on a note of terminal stasis—of “all that I will never do”—remarkably distinct from the generative tones that close the novel.

The Deer Park: A Play may not belong in the American dramatic canon alongside *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is, however, a rich (and richly contradictory) text, and standing as it does as Norman Mailer’s sole venture into professional theatrical writing and production, continues to merit both celebration and study.

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